

# Calif. water rights lawsuits a century in the making



Houseboats at Lake Oroville sit well below the high water mark. Photo/Kathryn Reed

**By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times**

The lawsuits hit the courts within days of the state mailing notices to some Central Valley irrigation districts: They were to stop diverting from rivers and streams because there wasn't enough water to go around.

Unsurprising as the move may be in this fourth year of drought, to the districts, the notices amounted to an assault on water rights they have held for more than a century.

"This is an attempted water grab," said Steve Knell, general manager of the Oakdale Irrigation District, one of several San Joaquin Valley agencies suing the state to block the curtailments. "It is a power move and we will fight tooth and nail to make sure that this doesn't happen."

The drought has highlighted the arcane workings of California's water rights system, one that rewards those who got here first and underpins agriculture's position as the

state's dominant water user.

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